

# Diversity and social engagement: Cultivating a working class theatre audience

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## Abstract

Bourdieu's *Distinction* examines the relationship between "taste" and class, and identifies culture as a field of struggle. Thus theatre venues, their rituals, and "paraphernalia", are sites which signal and reinforce ownership of valorised capital and audience members' relative positions in the field.

This research uses empirical, ethnographic methods such as thick description, depth interviews, and organic digital data analysis to examine theatre as a site for struggle, using Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre as a locus.

It finds that the Royal Court has cultivated a working class audience by promoting a particular form of theatre repertoire and content including tropes around nostalgia for a shared class experience. Moreover, the redesign of its auditorium and its distinctive business model has created a ludic physical space which exploits liminality and encourages participation.

The paper has implications for policy makers, theatres and cultural institutions in deepening understanding of how the "socially disadvantaged" can be cultivated. It further explores the relevance of Bourdieu's "conceptual triad".

Keywords: Theatre, theatregoing, audiences, class, taste

## Introduction

Despite the ongoing policy focus of participation and inclusion, various studies (Chan *et al.* 2008; McDonnell & Shellard 2006; Bunting *et al.* 2008) suggest that those who are "socially disadvantaged" remain less likely to attend theatre. While funding and ticket subsidy are often justified in terms of social inclusion, empirical research (Morris *et al.*, 1999; Chan *et al.* 2008) shows that pricing is only one small part of what are sometimes called "barriers" to attendance (Morris *et al.*, 1999:11). At the same time, contemporary policy-inspired empirical research into theatregoers and non-theatregoers (Hayes 2006; Creative Research 2007; Scollen 2008; Bunting *et al.* 2008) reveals an anxiety about theatregoing expressed through a preoccupation with dress, convention and other forms of ritual. However, much of this research does not distinguish on the basis of class.

This study uses empirical methods to examine mainstream theatre as a site for struggle, using the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, as a locus. The Royal Court has been successful in attracting to its audience people from the most deprived wards of the country, as well as many first time attenders, in stark contrast to the class origin of the prevailing theatre audience according to the empirical studies. The paper uses "thick description" (Ryle 1971; Geertz 1973; Denzin 1989) and focus groups to examine the field of theatregoing and the perception of it by theatregoers from some of the most disadvantaged wards in the UK, in order to illuminate some of the signs that may make working class people aware of something of which they are, according to Bourdieu, generally unconscious.

This builds on Pierre Bourdieu's work on the relationship between "taste" and class (1984). In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu suggests culture as a field of struggle, creating and amplifying class-related aesthetic preferences. According to Bourdieu, theatre venues, and the rituals and "paraphernalia" (1984:34) associated with them, are sites which both signal and reinforce ownership of valorised capital and audience members' relative position in this field, although this is something the agent in the field is generally unaware

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of. Expressions of anxiety suggested in the empirical research however may suggest that people are in fact conscious of unwritten rules and conventions which may seem “natural” (ibid.,:172) to the regular theatregoer, and can be reflexive about their own position in the field.

The paper addresses issues such as how people who are “socially disadvantaged” (Harvie, 2009:75) experience the theatregoing event; what are the signals that reinforce ownership of valorised capital and audience members’ relative position in the field of theatregoing; whether anxieties about theatregoing expressed, and if so what are the anxieties, and how far they relate to unwritten rules or *nomos* in the theatregoing field. Thus the paper also further explores the relevance of Bourdieu’s “conceptual triad” (Wacquant, 2006:9) through contemporary theatregoing.

## 1. Bourdieu: taste, and the conceptual triad

Bourdieu (1984) explains the relationship between social class, educational attainment and attendance at cultural events, including theatre, as having multiple factors linked to the conceptual triad of habitus, field and capital. His explanation encompasses firstly a class-related aesthetic preference, an enjoyment of or antipathy to certain elements of form and content, and secondly a distrust of formal innovation that may be about creating distinction between the initiated and uninitiated. This distrust and preference is not “natural” (68) but has been inculcated through socialization, particularly upbringing and then education, and is manifest in the “conceptual triad” (Wacquant, 2006:9) of field, habitus and capital. “Taste” is exhibited as well as reinforced by the environment of the cultural activity such as the theatre venue, and the manifestations and “paraphernalia” (34) within it that both signal and reinforce ownership of valorised capital and reinforce their position in the field; by the nature, and presence (or otherwise) of discourse around the event; and by the cost in both money and time, relative to poor or negative return on social capital. By using the conceptual devices of “field”, “habitus” and “capital” (101), Bourdieu escapes narrow determinism and allows for agency within a structure. The ownership of the correct sort of cultural capital, a “competence and familiarity” (63), passed down by the family or learnt in school, the reinforcement through a validation by social capital, and its continued embodiment in the habitus, gives an advantage to the bearer in the correct field. While habitus is difficult, if not impossible, to be reflexive about, the more contemporary empirical research suggests that there is a consciousness of habitus or indeed its lack within the field of theatregoing. Contemporary empirical evidence by Creative Research (2007), Scollen (2008), Bunting *et al.* (2008) and Hayes (2006) suggests, amongst other things, a sense that the less regular theatre goer is conscious of unwritten rules or *nomos* which s/he expresses through a preoccupation with these *nomos* in terms of dress, convention and other forms of ritual; an anxiety about the correct habitus and intellectual/aesthetic capacity (being able to understand the art form or its content); and a sense of being out of one’s “comfort zone” (Creative Research, 2007:51) within the field. How this consciousness of capital, habitus and the sense of knowing your place is transmitted within the field of theatregoing is the focus of this paper.

## 2. Methodology and Methods

The study uses a single case approach in order to investigate “a contemporary phenomena [sic] within its real life context” (Yin, 1994: 13). The Royal Court, Liverpool, was selected as the locus of this study following a visit where the researcher had noticed not just the constituency of the audience, but also some of the unusual tropes and rituals utilized at the theatre. These included Liverpool-centric programming drawing on a “Scouse”<sup>1</sup> mythology, facilities such as the bar within the auditorium that recalled popular music hall or the

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<sup>1</sup> Crowley (2012:107) defines *Scouseness* as a sort of performative socio-cultural identity, “not simply of Liverpool identity, but of Liverpool working class identity”. It is self-mythologising and self-referential; it goes beyond relating to an accent or dialect, and is an embodiment of an identity that is not only related to place but is gendered and class-based. It is a working class, white, male, Liverpool *habitus*.

working men's club, the breaking down of the fourth wall, and the interval screen that showed local advertising reminiscent of the Pearl and Dean advertising of 1970s cinema (de Castella, 2010). On the face of it, there seemed to be a relationship between working class theatregoing and the experience of theatre and its environment, and illumination was sought in theory such as Bourdieu's work on the stratification of taste in *Distinction* (1984).

## 2.1 The Royal Court Liverpool

In 2009, The Royal Court undertook an *Economic Impact Analysis* (2009) using a range of data including audience data captured at the box office, and postcode analysis of that data. According to this analysis, The Royal Court attracts audiences of 150,000-200,000 people per year, of which almost a third (32%) (Royal Court, 2009:2) report that they had previously never been to a theatre show before. As it also attracts a high number of repeat visits (70%, attend more than one show per year) (Royal Court, 2009:11), it may be inferred that some of the remaining 68% may have been first time theatre attenders who at the time of the study were on repeat visits. In other words, the Royal Court may not only be attracting a relatively high incidence of non-theatregoers, but perhaps converting some of them to regular theatregoers, or at least regular attenders at the Royal Court.

In terms of social class, postcode analysis presented in the Royal Court's *Economic Impact Analysis* (2009) tends to support the notion that The Royal Court, Liverpool has been successful in attracting to its audience the socially disadvantaged, in that it attracts people from the most deprived wards of the country, as well as many first time attenders. This in stark contrast with the class origin of the prevailing theatre audience according to the empirical studies (Grisolia *et al.* 2010, Chan *et al.* 2008, Scollen 2008, McDonnell & Shellard 2006, Millward Brown 1991). The analysis reveals that a preponderance of Royal Court attenders come from north Liverpool ("top ten" postcodes mentioned in the report include L12, L4, L9, L13, L31, L36) (Royal Court, 2009:6). The Royal Court further states that this is counter to the usual south Liverpool postcodes of "traditional" theatre attenders in Liverpool.

Liverpool City Council's *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (2010) is useful in putting these postcodes in a socioeconomic context. Compiled a year after the Royal Court report, the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* uses data on a range of indicators including income, skills, environment and education from a wide range of sources to assess Liverpool's deprivation against the national picture. Its overall finding is that "Liverpool remains the most deprived Local Authority area in England" (3). The analysis is broken down by ward. It finds that "The level of deprivation is particularly widespread and severe in neighbourhoods in north Liverpool [...] where almost all of the neighbourhoods are in the most deprived one or ten per cent" (ii) of the UK. Many of the Royal Court's reported attenders come from these deprived areas, including Everton and Kirkdale (L4) which are particularly deprived, being home to "the most deprived one per cent nationally" (ibid.). Also in the Royal Court's "top ten" attenders are three Wirral postcodes. "Wirral remains 60th most deprived [borough] nationally [of a total of 354] in the IMD [*Index of Multiple Deprivation*] 2010" (Risnes, 2011:2). In other words, the Royal Court is not only reaching a non-theatre audience, but also an audience from the most deprived areas of the country. This is counter to the origin of the prevailing theatre audience according to the empirical studies referred to above. As the Royal Court puts it, "This leads us to believe that audiences are not traditional theatre audiences but are new to the theatre" (Royal Court, 2009:6), not just in individual habits of theatregoing, but as social groups.

Consequently, the Royal Court is a useful place to illuminate what it is about the Royal Court experience that helps socially disadvantaged audience members to feel within their "comfort zone" (Creative Research, 2007:51), despite being in a cultural field that may be predicted to make them feel uncomfortable.

## 2.2 Thick Description

Given that there are a variety of signs manifest that demonstrate ownership or otherwise of the appropriate cultural capital and habitus, and that those signs transmitted by the field of legitimate culture can all be deduced by those entering the field, thick description was judged to be a useful method by which to identify the signs themselves and to examine the ways in which these signs may be transmitted.

Thick description was conducted using the “descriptive-interpretive” aspect of Geertz’s thick description (Denzin, 1989: 544) to describe the context of the theatre venue at several events. Specifically, one performance of each shows in the 2013/4 season was attended, the selection structured to include a variety of matinees, and first and last nights.

## 2.3 Focus groups

Alongside this, an ethnographic approach was taken, using focus groups made up of members of the Royal Court, Liverpool’s Community Choir in order to explore audience members’ theatregoing experience. It was important to understand what signs were felt to be important by working class people who do attend theatre, how such signs are perceived, and how the perception of these signs might reinforce a sense of habitus, of being in or out of “a personal ‘comfort zone’” (Creative Research, 2007: 51), or of feeling “excluded or unwelcome” (ibid., 2007: 55). In other words how a sense of habitus is transmitted and perceived, or to use Bourdieu’s terminology, what are the manifestations of the field, produced by the field in question. Questions and prompts were based on categories drawn from both Bourdieu’s work and the contemporary ethnographic research (e.g. nomos, ritual, discourse, dress), as well as from the thick description (topography, architecture, relationship with/between audience members, tropes).

## 2.4 TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor was a useful online forum from which to scrape existing data created by audience members who had not experienced the Royal Court Choir. TripAdvisor is a Web 2.0 site publishing content about holidays and travel, hosting the opinions and ratings of consumers on a range of attractions including theatres and entertainment venues such as the Royal Court, Liverpool. The subsequent data in the form of reviews and images is readily available to all accessing the site.

Advantages of using TripAdvisor include the advantage for much User Generated Content (UGC) and other organic data, that is that the data is already collected and is accessible to the researcher. In addition, it is user-generated and is without the bias of a researcher or corporate moderator; as Branthwaite & Patterson (2011) point out, some of the advantages of such data are similar to that of other qualitative data collection, in that it ‘gathers spontaneous views and opinions’ and gives ‘freedom for respondents to set the agenda and produce spontaneous ideas’. This leads to a greater level of neutrality, with a range of aspects of the venue/event being discussed based on the interests, observations and experiences of the theatregoer and their impression of what would interest their peers, rather than being framed or constrained by the interests and preconceptions of the researcher or the corporate moderator.

Users of TripAdvisor are also relatively free to share a range of opinions without risking the negative judgement of the site owner or moderator, compared to other sites which use UGC, such as fan sites and Facebook groups. Users also relate their reflections in their own vernacular, to an audience that may be imagined to be much like themselves. Consequently, whether reviews are positive or negative, the language tends to be open and helpful, intending to encourage, guide, or warn peers. Finally, in contrast with Twitter and its 140 character limit, and with Facebook where ‘reviews’ tend to be limited to one or two sentences, TripAdvisor reviews tend to use a paragraph or more to make their point, and so can comment in depth on an issue or can take in a broad sweep of issues. All of this results in rich data which may tell us much more about the experience than had people been asked in an interview. Finally, there are few ethical issues as

contributors have volunteered their reviews and placed them in a public arena, and use of pseudonyms means individuals cannot be easily identified.

Using this 'organic data' to supplement the 'designed data' collected from interviews, focus groups and thick descriptions further strengthened it, as data tended to confirm or enrich data collected through the ethnographic and phenomenological methods outlined above.

The 2013-14 season of plays at the Royal Court, Liverpool, was selected as a sampling frame for the TripAdvisor analysis as it was the same season as the thick descriptions that had already been undertaken for this study. This meant that the researcher had the advantage of familiarity with all of the shows reviewed, as well as with the venue and its operation over that period. The TripAdvisor site is dynamic and is constantly updated with new reviews; in addition, it would be possible (although unusual) for reviews to be removed by users or by site administrators. Consequently, all reviews of events from the 2013-14 season (n = 66) were isolated and archived for analysis.

## 2.5 Methods of Analysis

The data from thick descriptions, focus groups and TripAdvisor reviews was analysed using the categories drawn from both Bourdieu's work and the extant contemporary ethnographic research, as well as new categories drawn from close reading of the material (Jola *et al.*, 2011). This led to "thick interpretation" and consequently "thick meaning" of the findings (Ponterotto, 2006: 543). Themes included for instance, the importance of humour/comedy to working class theatregoers according to both Bourdieu (1984: 26) and McGrath (1989: 54); the importance of other audience members according to both the Creative Research (2007) and Scollen (2008) studies; the importance of *Scouseness* and the friendliness of staff according to some interviewees and focus group members. New themes, such as nostalgia, emerged and were added as the data was further analysed. Themes were then grouped into hierarchies of theme and sub-theme, leading to four final overarching themes: Show and Content; Venue; Comfort zone; and Discourse.

## 3. Findings and Analysis

### 3.1 Cultural Capital

As would be expected from both Bourdieu's discussion of the transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Wacquant 2006:31) as well as contemporary empirical research, many focus group members had been introduced to the theatre by family members, with focus group participants mentioning mums, dads, sisters and aunts as pivotal in passing down cultural capital. School trips were also important, not just in passing down capital but in reinforcing and valorising its importance, as in this example of Lynne's experience:

I had a teacher at school, the music teacher, who collected threepenny bits every Friday. If you were interested...and then when we had enough money, she'd buy tickets for the gods in every theatre in Liverpool, so by the time I was like ten, eleven, I'd been in every theatre, granted we were on the ceiling, y'know, but we'd been in every theatre, and, erm, she was my first introduction...she took us to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, or the operas, y'know, everything, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, every, every play, and it was, it was her that really gave me my love of theatre.

As may be expected from members of a community choir, participatory activities were also important as introductions to theatre, with youth theatre being central to one member's introduction and a theatre open day to another:

Angie: When I first went to a theatre I was about 15, it was an open day at the Playhouse, and we tried all the costumes on and took pictures, and my picture was actually in the paper

Maria: Oh fantastic. You look very proud about that Angie  
Angie: Yeah, I was like [laughs] "My God!" And then we kept going over to the theatre over there. With me Nan, and me Mum.

The unanticipated finding in terms of how people felt they were introduced to theatre was a familial relationship with entertaining. This is not necessarily family members who were part of the adjacent field of cultural production, and nor were they necessarily owners of a sanctioned understanding of culture or aesthetic appreciation of art which Bourdieu calls a "pure gaze" (1984:3). Rather these were families and family members who performed for enjoyment and to entertain each other:

Well my dad used to play the piano and the ukulele and the banjo, couldn't read a word of music, but he used to play, and we had a big bay window in our house with curtains that came across like that, we used to have our own pantomimes and plays, we'd sing, y'know lots of songs and everything, loved it (Patsy, Focus Group 2).

This and similar experiences were spontaneously volunteered by several older focus group members when asked about their early introduction to theatregoing, and in that sense they saw no particular separation between this and going to a theatre space for a professional performance of a valorised piece of theatre. This does not refute Bourdieu's conception of the inheritance of cultural capital, but adds a mechanism of transmitting capital that is perhaps culturally specific to the time and place where focus group members were growing up, i.e. Liverpool, England from 1940-60. As well as enlarging on methods of transmission of cultural capital, it may also suggest early embodiment of habitus leading to a level of comfort in the field.

### 3.2 Aesthetics

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu lists a range of aesthetic elements and discusses these in terms of social class and education, suggesting that an "aesthetic disposition" (28) acquired through aesthetic training leads to a particular, valorised, bourgeois taste. Bourdieu's catalogue of aesthetic elements of theatre preferred by working class audiences encompass form and content and include a "less euphemised" form, "plain speaking", and "hearty laughter" (34). In addition, Bourdieu states that theatrical forms such as "circus and melodrama [...] offer more immediate satisfactions". Bourdieu summarises this working class aesthetic as a "pragmatic, functionalist 'aesthetic' [...] built on all the choices of daily existence and of art of living which rejects specifically aesthetic intentions as aberrations" (Bourdieu, 1984:377). His list of aesthetic elements can be compared to McGrath's "Tastes of working class audiences" in his work *A Good Night Out* (1989:54), in which McGrath identifies "directness", comedy ("working class audiences like laughs"), and "effect" (defined as a need for constant engagement and "clear results") as important to a working class enjoyment of theatre. Thus both Bourdieu and later McGrath suggest a sort of working class aesthetic in terms of culture and specifically theatre. It is important to state that for Bourdieu (and for McGrath), this taste is not natural, but has been inculcated via the family through an inheritance/transfer of cultural capital, habitus and an inculcated understanding of the field, and completed and ratified via education (Wacquant, 2006: 31).

### 3.3 Aesthetics and repertoire: "local theatre for local people"

Analysis of the Royal Court's repertoire reveals a very Liverpool-centric, perhaps chauvinistic, programme. In addition to what What's On Stage (2009) describes as "Liverpool classics" (mostly local author Willy Russell, such as *Our Day Out*, and occasionally Alan Bleasdale), most subject matter is local with repertoire drawing on local landmarks and vernacular; new commissions tend to use puns and local landmarks to identify

themselves with Liverpool (*Scouse Pacific* 2010; *The Hitchhikers Guide to Fazakerley*<sup>2</sup> 2013; *Scouse of the Antarctic* 2014). Plays that originate outside the city are adapted to fit local topography. For instance, *Dirty Dusting*, a comedy about three women working as cleaners who, threatened with redundancy, set up a sex chat line, was originally written for a Durham audience (Waugh & Wood, 2013). In the 2009 Royal Court Liverpool production, references were changed to suit a Liverpool audience. Similarly, *Ladies Day* had originally been developed by Hull Truck to coincide with Royal Ascot at York Racecourse, but for its run at the Royal Court, Liverpool, had been transposed to Aintree during the annual Grand National horse race. The word “local” is constantly reiterated in press releases and on the theatre’s website, and the unique character of Liverpool and its audience is emphasised: The Royal Court has “developed a unique style of theatre for Liverpool audiences... produced in Liverpool, starring Liverpool actors, written by Liverpool writers...” (Royal Court, 2011a). These strategies are seen by focus group members as one of the things that make them feel “at home”, with one member, Ursula, describing the repertoire as “local theatre for local people”. These strategies of localisation are not unique to the Royal Court, Liverpool, but the saturation of the programme in this way perhaps is.

### 3.4 Comedy: “Hearty Laughter”

Examination of the Royal Court’s repertoire certainly sustains Bourdieu’s notions of the importance of comedy and “hearty laughter” (1984:34). Every in-house show is a comedy. Comedy, and Liverpool’s alleged relationship to it, is highlighted throughout the programme and beyond (the press releases and the website, emphasised on poster). This is reflected in the building too; in 2007 the Royal Court hung in the foyer a plaque “commemorating four great Liverpool comics, Arthur Askey, Ted Ray, Robb Wilton and Tommy Handley...[Liverpool comedian Ken Dodd] said: ‘...I have always wanted to have a celebration of the great comedians of Liverpool who started it off. They made the Liverpool sense of humour famous all over the world’” (Liverpool Echo, 2008).

Comedy is used to promote accessibility and to counter the notion of theatre as an elitist pastime. Shows are sold as “a good laugh...to round your week off” (High, 2009a). The audience is itself emphasised and (unusually for theatres) depicted on the website; the image shows the audience laughing (Royal Court 2011b).

### 3.5 Identification: class

The Royal Court’s repertoire contains what may be called heroic tales of working class people in working class professions, often depicted in the site of struggle that is the workplace. Protagonists are working class and the subject matter is their workplace; characters have low-skilled, blue collar occupations such as taxi driving (*Night Collar*), cleaning (*Dirty Dusting*), council workers (*Council Depot Blues*), shop assistants (*A Fistful of Collars*) or beauty technicians (*The Salon*). The *mise-en-scène* is the workplace (shop, factory, call centre), or the night out (the bingo or the club). Characters make good, often by getting rich quick, either through luck (*Funny Money* - Danny finds “two million quid” on the bus (Royal Court, 2010); *Lucky Numbers* - Nana wins the Lotto); or cheek/resourcefulness (*Dirty Dusting* - cleaners threatened with redundancy make money by setting up a weekend chat line).

A closer examination reveals recurrent themes, such as local rivalry (*Brick up the Mersey Tunnels*, but also untrustworthy characters played in a Manchester accent in *Ladies Day* for instance) and a distrust of authority. The theme of wish fulfilment is often centred on money, but lack of money is also a barrier without which the action cannot proceed (in *Ladies Day*, the finding of a handbag containing tickets to an enclosure and money to enjoy it is essential to the plot unfolding). There is perhaps further potential; for these plays to

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<sup>2</sup> Fazakerley is a north Liverpool suburb known for its housing estates, hospital and prison.



be about subversion, about revealing inner psychological truths, about exposing the nature of society to the audience, about education in its wider sense. However, according to some critics, the plays are “too formulaic, the characterisation baldly stereotypical, and much of the humour wouldn’t be out of place in the crudest standup routine” (Hickling of *The Guardian* in 2009, here about the sell out and oft-repeated *Night Collar*, although he is similarly unenthusiastic about *Dirty Dusting*).

Fearon, the theatre’s Chief Executive, says they “aim to provide the best for our audiences and they can trust us to send them home happy” (What’s On Stage, 2009), and this is supported by regular performer Eithne Brown, who defines “a Royal Court show” as “a lot of fun for audiences, with characters that they will immediately identify with” (High, 2009b).

### 3.6 Aesthetics: Form

Fused with content is form, and Bourdieu’s empirical research suggests a class-related aesthetic preference in form, and a distrust of formal innovation. According to Bourdieu, working class people preferred a “less euphemised” form, “plain speaking”, and “hearty laughter” (1984:34), as well as forms which “offer more immediate satisfactions” (he gives the culturally-specific example of melodrama). Similarly, McGrath in *A Good Night Out* (1989:54), identifies “directness”, comedy, and “effect” (defined as a need for constant engagement and “clear results”) as important to a working class enjoyment of theatre.

Drawing on thick description and the published repertoire, the form of shows at the Royal Court, Liverpool can be briefly analysed. Plays are almost always set in the present day and in settings familiar to a working class audience. There is little abstraction in set and costume design, and often set items are what they purport to be and require no suspension of disbelief. Ladies Day for instance is set in a food-packing factory, so the actors are uniformed in white overalls and catering hats.

Stories tend to be narrative and told sequentially in chronological fashion, although flashback can be used. First person narrative is sometimes used as a structuring device. Language is robust. Lines are “nearly always deliver loudly and with little subtlety” (Liverpool Live, 2014). Characters tend to the caricature rather than the well drawn, and there is little character development. As for a West End musical, the actors are miked. Some commentators have described delivery of content as “crowd pleasing” (critic Jones, 2014, on *Special Measures*) and “playing to the gallery” (local arts blog Made Up, 2011, on *Scouse Pacific*).

Music is important, not just in programming musicals or music-inspired shows like *Lennon*, but in other plays too. There is much use of local music (for instance Northern Soul in *Special Measures*, and Liverpool bands the Lightning Seeds and Mighty Wah in *YNWA*). In addition, *Special Measures* used music and dancing to cover the transitions, perhaps to make the message more palatable:

I think that [the music], that made it as well. So it was a balance of it being fun  
and musical light with the political side (Susan).

Music is used as a point of recognition and for participation, rather than to move the story along as in the case of musicals.

The most important and distinctive element of the form of theatre at the Royal Court though is the atmosphere generated. This is festive and communal, and audience participation, in the form of call and response or singing along, is encouraged. The “Fourth Wall” (the convention of an invisible separation between audience and performers) is often breeched, and verbal exchanges take place between audience and cast, creating a relationship with the actors and adding to the experience of the show:

Sarah: Yeah. But I think it’s different here in terms of if you’re heckling  
[agreement from the group] and the performers that you have here  
can deal with that, whereas it would be very unseemly in anything else  
[...]

- Maria: So you like participation here but you don't [at the Everyman]? And it's partly because it's a sort of banter
- Sarah: Yeah. I don't shout out, but I like to, I enjoy the banter, it doesn't spoil the performance  
[....]
- Susan: I think here the banter sort of makes the performance more; the shows are funny as is, but with the banter, I think it makes it more, it adds [yeah, it adds].

The emphasis is on having fun through direct engagement between the audience and the performers, but the "banter" goes beyond this to participation, almost collaboration. While some shows have little by the way of narrative flow or dramatic urgency, this doesn't seem to matter, it's the taking part that counts. Endings are not moral or constructive, but rather celebratory and participative. There is resolution to narratives, but the real resolution is for the audience; invariably there is an opportunity to get out of your seat at the end and dance, sing along, or, in the case of *YNWA*, a history of Liverpool Football Club, wave your scarf. There is an almost cathartic sense; audience members can finally join in. Hickling (2010) characterises this as "adult pantomime".

It is important to note that while there are similarities of form across many of the shows, there are some that conform less to these fixed categories, particularly where they are productions with origins elsewhere, such as *Once A Catholic*, a co-production with Tricycle Theatre. *Sons of the Desert* was literally a live version (word for word, action for action) of the short Laurel and Hardy film of 1933, although the first half compensated by being set in a Liverpool music hall. *Special Measures*, the only overtly political play in the 2013/4 season, used an almost agit-prop form with dialectic and polemic, interspersed with music from the Northern Soul back catalogue. Nonetheless, the important elements of plain speaking and robustness of language, identification, participation and celebration were very much present.

Overall, the form of theatre at the Royal Court can be described as hearty, honest and down to earth, full of "plain speaking" and generating the "hearty laughter" suggested by Bourdieu (1984:34). There is constant audience engagement and this is an embodied engagement, with the audience's contributions to the show important to what is a "good night out".

### 3.7 Environment

Bourdieu also suggests that the very environment of the major theatres, alongside galleries and museums, serves as a separating mechanism which is perhaps discerned by the working class audience:

Formal refinement [...] is part of the paraphernalia which always announces the sacred character, separate and separating, of high culture – the icy solemnity of the great museums, the grandiose luxury of the opera-houses and major theatres, the decor and decorum of concert-halls. Everything takes place as if the working class audience vaguely grasped what is implied in conspicuous formality, both in art and in life [...] (Bourdieu, 1984:26).

In contrast,

At the Royal Court, theatre is sold as part of a package which includes dinner and a drink in the "cabaret style" stalls (Royal Court, 2015a). The stalls seats were removed in an earlier incarnation as a popular music venue but have not been replaced by traditional red plush tip-up theatre seats; this gives the effect of breaking down the elitism which is otherwise inherent in or associated with a proscenium arch. Instead there is a newly restored auditorium, the Art Deco splendour complementing the traditional proscenium arch picked out in gold.

The auditorium is full of traditional red plush, and there is a beautifully-lit red velvet gilded curtain. To the sides, the royal boxes remain, facing outwards to the auditorium to show off their occupants rather than towards the stage to see the show. Contrasting with this are very modern gloss white curved bench tables, like a casino or an expensive lecture hall, following the sweep of the whole auditorium. At the front are several round, cabaret-style tables. Some audience members sit around the tables in convivial groups, with pints, wine buckets and food. Half the stalls have come for dinner, and the auditorium smells of salt and vinegar and chips. Other audience members share the long white curved tables, sitting in rows on comfy red plush swivel receptionist seats. Tables have numbers on, displayed in number holders like placements at a wedding. During the pre-show, there is some movement around the auditorium, to get drinks and to say hello and mingle. Most of the audience are already seated when I get here, the preshow as important as the show, perhaps facilitated by the bar at the back of the auditorium (Thick Description 1, *Ladies Day* 12th July 2013).

The eclectic, “pub grub”-style dinner menu includes the “The Royal Court’s famous ‘scouse” (Royal Court, 2015b), and this is the only dish available at the daytime *Variety Lunch* events:

This is the first time I have entered the auditorium without being overwhelmed by the smell of fish and chips, but there is a homely food smell nonetheless. I’m at the curvy end of row again, between a big woman and a small man. Somehow being sandwiched between this Bamforth postcard coupling seems fitting for a *Variety Lunch*. I realise I really have no idea what to expect from a *Variety Lunch*. I’m surprised by how busy the auditorium is though, busy enough to have the Circle seats open upstairs. A hot bowl of scouse arrives unordered just as I sit down. I look around. Everyone’s having scouse. The set for *Once a Catholic*, the evening show, is up, but with a mic in front, centre stage. The set is a stained glass sunburst surrounding a purple rhombus of plush curtain. The bar is open at the back of the auditorium and is moderately busy, mostly selling pints and halves of lager. There is also a tea urn set up at the front with a small queue that never seems to go down, one patient grey haired person in a cardigan replacing another.

My scouse arrives. Scouse is the eponymous local dish, apparently named for Lobsouse, a sailor’s stew. In Liverpool, it is traditionally served with red cabbage, and everyone seems to have their own recipe, claiming everyone else’s as “not proper scouse”. This one is a soupy version, eaten from a bowl. There are chunky potatoes and carrots and big pieces of lamb with ribs of savoy cabbage. It isn’t dainty, it’s old school and traditional. And it isn’t bad at all. A grey woman in powder blue walks very slowly up the aisle trying not to spill a mug of tea. Everyone has mugs, there are no genteel cups and saucers. People with sticks are struggling to get along rows. People are laughing. (Thick Description 5, *Variety Lunch*, 2014).

The environment then is relaxed, homely and friendly, with strangers chatting and offering drinks to strangers when they get a round. The seating, reminiscent of a bingo or social club, facilitates group chat. Members of both focus groups mentioned feeling “at home” in the environment of the Royal Court. This is reinforced in an

interview with a local newspaper by actor and Royal Court regular Eithne Browne: "...a woman stopped me to say 'thank you, we love coming to the Royal Court, it's our place'" (Jones, 2009).

### 3.8 Discourse

In his chapter *The Choice of the Necessary*, Bourdieu (1984: 373-397) suggests that the lack of value placed on "legitimate culture" limits its discussion amongst working class people, and further that entering into such discussion would actually create a loss of social capital due to the social opprobrium gained through "pretension", of being seen as wishing to distinguish oneself, which would ultimately be interpreted as a "refusal or repudiation of the group" (Bourdieu, 1984: 379-380). When asked about the difficulties of talking about cultural experiences in social groups back home after the performance, the members of the focus groups did not find a resonance here. For example, one member, Lynne, says:

Yeah, yeah, my parents were very interested and my grandfather, my grandfather especially, you know what ever I went to see, I used to go home and relate the whole thing to him and do all the actions, and what was going on, and y'know, this one did this one and she had a fairy hat on and y'know all the rest of it.

There was general agreement amongst focus group members that they had not found this "social opprobrium" to be an issue. This may be for a number of reasons. One may be that it had not been experienced, that, contrary to Bourdieu's findings, such discussion actually occasions a rise in social capital within this particular culture/social group, perhaps because of the culture or social group's familial relationship with theatre and performance as discussed earlier. Another reason may be an unwillingness to discuss social opprobrium within a setting such as a focus group. It is also possible that some members may be actively seeking to use the distinction lent by such capital as a separating mechanism themselves, to step out of their class, rather than having the positive desire for class identity and solidarity that Bourdieu suggests. Indeed, one focus group member consistently indicated her distinction from her peer group and family, talking of her special interest and discernment ("I used to pick all the music, because I was the one that was always interested in classical music". Lynne, FG2).

### 3.9 Sense of "distinction"

Theatre-going as a separating mechanism was talked about in three ways. The first was between "proper theatre" (Lynne, Focus Group 2), and more populist entertainment such as musicals and pantomimes, and the people who attended them.

Maria: So that's interesting because you talked about it was "just" musicals, and you said "proper plays"....What's a "proper play" then?

Sarah: "Proper plays" in my head are the ones that not a lot of people have heard of and they might be a little bit more obscure and it's, sort of, you know, thespian, y'know, rep [repertory theatre, a valorised form of theatre] kind of thing

Interestingly though, many of the participants of the focus groups claimed a liking, and sometimes a preference, for valorised works from what might be called the theatrical canon, such as Euripides' *Medea*, or for the social comedies of Oscar Wilde. It was interesting that where this was the case, some focus group members sought to downplay or apologise for their own aesthetic preference, as focus group member Edna does here:

they did some brilliant stuff on there, lots of musicals, erm, Roy Orbison, the Beatles, loads of stuff, and also, erm, things that I loved - call me a miserable

cow! [Laughter] - I loved Greek tragedy like *Medea*, would sit for four hours, and erm Shakespeare stuff and all that.

This tempering of enthusiasm is consistent with Bourdieu's discussion of social pressure and the desire to not be seen as wanting to step out of class positions, and a positive desire for class identity and solidarity (Bourdieu, 1984: 383).

The second way in which theatre was talked about as a separating mechanism was in relation to dress:

Sarah: You know, because I'm, I'm sort of looking at all these people who have got dressed up dead posh and I'm going in there going, I do this all the time, this is nothing different for me, and it sort of...you know, you think you're better than I am, but you're not. [Laughs]

Maria: I think it's really interesting. So you're consciously saying, I'm not..

Sarah: This is a not an elitist pursuit. You know. And it shouldn't be. [...]

Ursula: Because you go so regularly, it's normal for you...

Sarah: It's normal, and I want it to be normal for other people

Ursula: [...] other people who do it like every blue moon and think of it as a so special that they have to get dressed up

Sarah: But I think there's something else, I think there's other people that go "look at me because I'm dead posh" at the theatre.

It is interesting that Sarah felt not only that dress was used as a separating mechanism and that this had a relationship to elitism, but was something she felt she actively tried to subvert. It was also interesting that Ursula felt that others who attended theatre less often would not have the same confidence, and later Susan in the same focus group felt the need to reclaim her right to dress up.

Finally, theatregoing and aesthetic preference seemed to be used as a mechanism that distinguished some audience members from others in their own social class. As mentioned briefly in the previous section, focus group member Lynne re-asserted her particular taste and discernment: "The teacher was interested enough to pick the ones out who were interested" – of which she was one, and a significant one at that. She claims this for her family too, as if this is an inherited distinction: "Yeah, I've got a very subtle sense of humour [...] I've got an eldest daughter [...] she went to university and did literature, but she read Shakespeare when she was six". It is perhaps not surprising that some working class people are using theatre as a strategy for distinction, but this is against Bourdieu's sense of a desire not to be seen to step out of your class. This may represent a change or difference in 21st century working class culture in England where social pressure is individually aspirational rather than communal, reflecting an atomising of society and a fracturing of class (Voigt, 2007; Tyler, 2015:112); or perhaps it exposes a generalizing about class solidarity in Bourdieu's thinking.

## 2.10 Field

According to Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992: 105), a field should be analysed by its power relationship with other fields, alongside "agents or institutions" within that field. Some of the focus group discussion does give some sense of the Royal Court within its field: "You get your regional kind of humour, local theatre for local people here, then you get your big West End shows, you get your proper musicals up at the Empire...you get your comedies or your locals at the Neptune" (Sarah, FG1). A field analysis, further exploring and examining the relationship with power that is expressed by, through and within the field of theatregoing through its various distinctions, and how these signs of distinction are manifest and perceived, would be useful.

## Conclusion

While Bourdieu himself was clear that the findings of his empirical research were culturally-specific, he is similarly clear that he had attempted, through using the specific “exemplary case” of French society at a certain time, to propose a “model which aspires to universal validity” (Bourdieu, 1996). To achieve this, he suggested avoiding concentration on particular cases and practices (such as a working class preference for melodrama) in favour of looking at the relational model, the invariant, the structure. Consequently it is neither possible nor desirable to map the experience of working class theatre in Liverpool in 2010-14 onto the socio-cultural conditions of 1960s and 1970s France. Nonetheless it is interesting to see that the power relationships Bourdieu described are present, relevant, and being played out in Liverpool theatregoing in 2014.

Specifically, cultural capital for these participants has been transmitted largely as Bourdieu suggested, through upbringing and ratified by education. However there is the added dimension in some cases of a socialised feel for theatregoing inculcated through participation in informal performance at home. This may in some cases be responsible for a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990:109) that becomes embodied in the habitus, allowing some socially disadvantaged people to feel comfortable in a milieu that might be expected to make them feel discomfited.

Working class aesthetic preference in content and form is being delivered at the Royal Court Liverpool, and attendance figures suggest that this is successful in attracting and retaining working class audience members. Participation is central to that, as is a sense of nostalgia and shared references. However, some working class people claim a more “omnivorous” preference (Peterson, 1992), to include valorised theatre such as the classical, alongside popular forms such as musicals.

The theatre environment is central in making people feel “at home” (Focus group members). “Icy solemnity” (Bourdieu, 1984:26) has been replaced at the Royal Court by a more open and relaxed space, creating a sense of home, of “our place” (Jones, 2009). Some evidence of this emanates from members of the Community Choir, who may have been assumed to feel more “at home” than audience members with no participatory connection to the theatre. However, the evidence from the TripAdvisor sample suggested that they experienced a similar level of comfort within the Royal Court.

Contrary to Bourdieu’s assertion, participants in the research do not report any sense of social opprobrium when discussing theatregoing, and some positively stated the opposite, that discussion of theatre increased their social capital. Indeed, some working class theatregoers are using theatregoing as a separating mechanism within their class, to demonstrate superior discernment or intelligence. This may be due to a fragmentation of class solidarity, or perhaps an overstatement of homogeneity on the part of Bourdieu.

It is interesting to see that theatre and theatregoing continue to act as separating mechanisms in twenty-first century Britain. The Royal Court, Liverpool, has successfully countered this by transmitting a range of signals that tell the audience that the theatre is their space. This includes a repertoire of straightforward storylines based on local and class-related themes including nostalgia; and familiar, local performers, giving audience members a sense of knowingness. In addition, the redesign of the theatre’s auditorium with its clusters of tables rather than rows of traditional theatre seats, and its distinctive business model in which food is sold alongside theatre, has created a ludic physical space which exploits liminality and encourages participation. Other cultural spaces could learn from this model by adjusting the content of their cultural offer not only by presenting subject matter that may attract non-traditional audiences and participants, but also to reflect their modes of being an audience member, that may for instance be participative rather than passive. Finally, addressing how the space is occupied and allowing audiences to congregate and use the space in ways they may be more familiar with and that allow them to engage socially with others like themselves can help audiences to make the institutional space into a place of their own.

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